RFK Assassination

Ballistics Evidence: More Than One Gun

By Jon Newhall

Santa Clarita Valley's Supervisor Baxter Ward has called for an independent re-investigation into the 1968 assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles.

Ward issued his appeal for a re-hearing on Monday after presenting a series of expert witnesses whose testimony indicated that Senator Kennedy may have been the victim of a conspiracy.

Kennedy was gunned down in the pantry area of the Ambassador Hotel on the night of the 1968 California Democratic Presidential primary. The alleged-lone assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, was apprehended just moments after the shooting, and he was later convicted and sentenced to San Quentin prison.

Supervisor Ward, however, in his capacity as chairman of the Los Angeles Coroner's Commission, presented evidence and witnesses during Monday's public hearing which cast serious doubt as to whether Sirhan was, indeed, acting alone.

Among the parade of witnesses called by Ward were two independent ballistics experts — they prefer to be called "forensic firearms identification experts" — who indicated that more than one gun was fired during the R.F.K. shooting.

One of the experts, Pasadena criminologist William Harper, was ill and did not appear in person. But Harper's sworn affidavit, read into the hearing record, made some rather dramatic charges.

Harper's statement explained that he had examined three bullet slugs recovered immediately after the shooting with a criminology device known as a "Hycon Balliscan camera." The camera is used to magnify and photograph spent bullet slugs so that it can be determined if two slugs were,

Continued on Page 10

This is a story I wrote after attending Baxter Ward's hearing into the R.F.K. Killing. The hearing was held 5/13/74 in Los Angeles. I wrote this story for a paper my parents own.

It continues on next page.

Ballistics Evidence: More Than One Gun In RFK Assassination

Continued from Page 1

in fact, fired from the same gun.

Harper stated that one bullet was removed from Senator Kennedy's neck; that a second slug was recovered from the abdomen of newsman William Weisel, who was wounded during the assassination; and the third bullet was obtained by Los Angeles police who fired it from Sirhan's gun during a subsequent laboratory test.

Harper stated in his sworn statement that he believed no two of the three bullets were fired from the same gun.

Harper's analysis was backed up by another independent ballistics expert, Professor Herbert MacDonell of Elmira, New York. MacDonell said that he too, reviewed the results of "Hycon Balliscan" photographs, and concluded that it was likely that two different guns fired the bullets which struck Kennedy and Weisel.

The ballistics experts also agreed that the Kennedy and Weisel bullets were almost certainly manufactured by different ammunition companies and were sold in different boxes of shells. This conflicts with testimony at Sirhan's trial that all of the bullets in his gun and in his possession came from a single manufacturer.

Another witness who gave rather dramatic testimony was Dr. Thomas Noguchi, the Los Angeles County Coroner and the man who conducted the autopsy on Senator Kennedy nearly six years ago.

Dr. Noguchi testified that Senator Kennedy was struck by three bullets, all of them fired from just behind the Senator and at extremely close range. According to Dr. Noguchi, the fatal bullet which struck the Senator was fired at a distance of only one to three inches from Kennedy's right ear.

Supervisor Ward contrasted Noguchi's testimony with statements made by three eye-witnesses to the shooting during Sirhan's 1969 trial. The three witnesses, said Ward, as he read the trial transcript, placed Sirhan's gun from four to 15 feet away when the shooting occurred.

Ward had specifically invited representatives of the County District Attorney's office and the Los Angeles Police Department to testify, because these were the two agencies which supervised the original assassination investigation.

Both agencies refused.

District Attorney Joseph Busch charged that the evidence, which is now nearly six years old, is no longer valid for re-examination. Ward, however, asked each of the ballistics experts who testified if the evidence could possibly have deteriorated, and each replied that the evidence still appears to be in perfect condition.

Busch also stated that Ward's probe was "a wholly improper expenditure of County funds," adding that Ward's interest was "an act solely for the political aggrandizement of Supervisor Ward's present political campaign" for governor.

Los Angeles police department ballistics expert DeWayne Wolfer, the technician who conducted the lab studies in 1968, also declined to attend and testify "on advice of counsel."

Ward did present Dr. Vincent P. Guinn, a research chemist at the University of California at Irvine, who suggested that a "neutron activation analysis" test of all existing bullets might prove — once and for all — if more than one gun was fired during the assassination. A neutron activation analysis, explained Dr. Guinn, could demonstrate whether all the bullet fragments came from the same supply of ammunition.

Dr. Noguchi stated that he had called for an identical test back in 1968, shortly after Kennedy was slain, but was stopped by Los Angeles police officials. Dr. Noguchi quoted Los Angeles police ballistics expert Wolfer as insisting that the analysis would produce "too much variance."

In a local angle, one of the people wounded during the Kennedy shooting was Sand Canyon resident Elizabeth "Betsy" Evans. When reached by The Signal after Monday's hearing, she stated that she could not be sure if one, or more assassins was involved. She stated it was difficult to see Sirhan in the room because he "was dressed like a lot of other people were that night — in a kitchen uniform or something."

Ward said he will ask the full Board of Supervisors next Tuesday to review the transcripts of Monday's hearing, and will then ask his colleagues to call for a complete re-investigation of the Robert Kennedy killing by an independent body.